



## Lana Clarkson's fade to black

**The slain actress at the center of the Phil Spector trial joins a tragic cast of women swallowed up by noir Hollywood.**

By Wesley Strick, WESLEY STRICK is a screenwriter whose credits include "Cape Fear" (1991) and "Return to Paradise" (1998). His first novel, "Out There in the Dark," was published last year.

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You have to wonder about Lana Clarkson. Yes, "Lana Clarkson" was her real name; she wasn't Frances Gumm or Norma Jeane Baker. And Lana was born right here in Southern California, not eastern Tennessee or northern Minnesota. So you have to wonder why — even fading, at 40 — she didn't know better. And what was she thinking when she climbed

into Phil Spector's limo that night?

At what point do you realize that the B-movies you've made for half your life have become the B-movie that is your life?

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### FOR THE RECORD:

Tate murder: In an April 18 Op-Ed article about Lana Clarkson, the murder of Sharon Tate was said to have happened on a Sunday afternoon. Tate was murdered in the early morning hours of Saturday, Aug. 9, 1969. —

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Maybe the presence of the driver, Adriano DeSouza, soothed her as she sat in the back seat with Spector. She probably didn't realize he'd wait in the car when they got to the Castle. And she had no way of knowing that, an hour later, her host would walk out to the driveway with a gun in his hand and (reportedly) tell DeSouza, "I think I killed somebody."

Clarkson had left work as a hostess at the House of Blues in West Hollywood, and they were headed for Spector's Alhambra mansion. It wasn't close — more than 15 miles away. After midnight, traffic would have been light, but still, it had to take half an hour.

Spector claims that she wanted to see the eye-popping, 30-room "Castle Pyrenees" at the top of the hill where the runty recluse had lived since 1998, and he'd kindly obliged her. So, as DeSouza drove south on the 101, was Clarkson thinking about Xanadu?

She probably didn't know much about William Randolph Hearst — Patty, maybe, but not Patty's grandfather. Clarkson wouldn't have pictured San Simeon. But she might have thought of Orson Welles' fictional Xanadu, the gloomy pleasure palace from "Citizen Kane." And about how the young, blond Susan Alexander Kane who was trapped there — though not in danger of dying, except maybe of boredom. Susan did jigsaw puzzles to pass the time.

Did she think of Norma Desmond's gorgeous but creepy old Moorish mausoleum on — and in — "Sunset Boulevard"? They were going the other way — on the 10 East now, toward San Bernardino — and anyway, Desmond was a batty old lady, not a batty old man like Spector. And Joe Gillis, the nice young guy Norma shot in a fit of demented rage as he tried to leave her house was, well, a guy.

Who knows what Lana and Phil were chatting about, in the back of that limo? They'd only met an hour earlier. Maybe Lana was staring out the tinted window as DeSouza merged onto the 710 North. Was she thinking about two other Hollywood blonds — real ones, this time — who were butchered, slaughtered: Sharon Tate and Dorothy Stratten?

Stratten would have been about the same age as Clarkson had she not found herself at the wrong end of a shotgun more than 20 years earlier. Hadn't Clarkson seen "Star 80"? But Stratten was a rube from Vancouver, a naif, whereas Clarkson was a native who'd been around the block. A survivor.

And what about Tate, another sex goddess who, like Stratten, was involved with a world-class director who'd starred her in his own movies? Clarkson would've been 7 when news of the Tate murders broke. Slain in her own home on a peaceful Sunday afternoon, Sharon was. And Lana didn't have Polanski or Bogdanovich in her corner. Just Roger Corman, and the lead in "Barbarian Queen."

By now they'd have exited the freeway, onto Valley Boulevard. And as DeSouza turned right onto Grand View Drive, Clarkson must have glimpsed Spector's looming concrete chateau, half-hidden by cedar, palm and pine trees, high up on the hill.

Had she heard the stories about Spector waving guns at John Lennon and Dee Dee Ramone? About the glass coffin he'd supposedly built for his then-wife Ronnie, which he kept in the basement as a warning to stay faithful or wind up on display down there, like Snow White? Of his rumored predilection for running around the grounds dressed in a Batman suit? Perhaps she'd heard it but didn't believe it.

As DeSouza climbed the long driveway up to Spector's gated estate, did Clarkson — just for a moment — think of "Beyond the Valley of the Dolls," the infamously lurid, calculatedly trashy Russ Meyer exploitation pic that is, by bizarre coincidence, a Rosetta stone for the chain of events that would shortly end her life?

"BTVOTD" climaxes with a deadly rampage perpetrated by (spoiler alert) Ronnie "Z-Man" Barzell, a hugely successful, willful, ultimately deranged record producer, a "tycoon of teen" believed to be modeled on Phil Spector. And though it was written (by Roger Ebert) more than 30 years before this fateful night in February 2003, the final sequence has a tripped-out Barzell dressed in a leotard Superwoman outfit, spouting such lines as "ere this night does wane, you will drink the black sperm of my vengeance!" and blowing away several babe-alicious young wannabes he'd been holding captive in his sprawling, decadent playground/mansion.

Like those doomed movie hotties, Clarkson never made it out of the famed producer's chateau. Her shattered teeth were found all over the foyer. She'd been shot in the mouth with a .38-caliber Colt.

But you know that new Lana Clarksons arrive in L.A. every day — and some, like Lana, are born here. You hope future Lanas will hear about the Dorothys, the Sharons, the Z-Man Barzells and Norma Desmonds. You hope they'll learn to see the pitfalls, the warning signs, the precipice. Sense when their dreams are curdling into nightmares, their lives turning into an "E! True Hollywood Story" episode.

You hope the nightclub hostesses of tomorrow will hesitate before ducking into a limo with the next eccentric legendary has-been who's now famous mostly for drinking too much and playing with guns. You hope these women will make smarter choices. But you have to wonder.